

Obrecht

Obrecht wore a ring.

The little gold thing fit around the fourth-finger of his right hand, above the missing stub where Bleys had twisted off his pinky. It felt like a battleship. It weighed him down as tons of bricks and gave him the strength of teams of horses to lift it. It was power, beauty, and grace, and the circular band with no beginning or end promised the ring would never betray him. It was with him forever. It was his. It loved him.

#

With rain on the surface the sea of Amber lay dark, and below the surface the shelf of the land fell sharply. Where Garnath came to the beach the ground dipped slowly underwater, but not far out, less than a mile at low tide, the edge of the continent formed a great escarpment. Below this cliff sunlight did not reach far on the brightest of days, and under the sudden squall that lashed the port of Amber, the ocean was blacker than night.

This purity was marred in one place. Comparatively shallow, less than a thousand feet deep, a great twisted stairway descended under the water and every so many yards an a pillar of stone illuminated the darkness with a single brilliant flame, burning in and of itself without fuel.

One man walked down the stairway alone. Red was his hair, and the water twisted and pulled it upright until even in the subnautic gloom, he seemed fire-headed. Red also was his beard and the rubies on his clothes. Gold threads, silver buckles, and diamonds, emeralds, and sapphires the buttons on his coat. He walked down the stairs. He did not float. His clothes hung though stray currents toyed with them like strong winds. On his lips played a dreadful smile.

Bleys walked into Rebma, Amber under the sea, and met the guards at the gate asking for Queen Moire. They told him she was present in the throne room and lead him on.

Rebma mirrored Amber underwater but did so with trickery. It would show the One True City reflected left to right, and elsewhere as it was, left to left. Bleys knew it intimately, and felt his blood call to the buildings and roads, the lesser pathways and longer highways within. The people wore swimming trunks scaled like fish, some with wide belts, some with harness across the chests like divers. They breathed water. Both men and women went topless, and the water was far warmer than it should have been at that depth. Tropical fish flitted around like birds. More pillars rose, breaking the image of Amber, but revealing it as well as their lights burned in and of themselves, a few feet tall, a few inches above the pillars, and completely without wood or coal.

Moire met Bleys in her throne hall as she had met Corwin some years earlier and regarded the red-headed prince with deep skepticism. Her face was heart-shaped under green hair with green eyes, crowned with a white-gold crown. She wore silver trunks with an emerald belt, and nothing else, meeting his eyes without embarrassment. Bleys looked on her and felt pressure in his loins before remembering Corwin had been here, and suddenly he hated her.

"Why have you come to Rebma, Prince of Amber?" asked Moire. She spoke with a soft lisp. "Your kind come and go. They take what they will. Rarely does it work out well for others. What do you desire now?"

And Bleys hated her twice for being a cripple and daring to rule in an image of Amber. He decided to kill her, and that made him smile.

"Moire," he said, omitting titles. "I'm here to see you. A change has come over my thinking recently. It's like I've rounded a corner with the sun in my eyes and have finally begun seeing clearly. With peace in Amber and the queen from Rebma, I've come here to speak with you. And I'd like to give you something. I ask nothing in return, but a bit of your time."

She looked at him skeptically, but Bleys smiled warmly. He had observed her, and she knew something of the Princes of Amber.

"What is your gift?"

Bleys took a ring from a silver bag, a simple thing of yellow gold. He balanced it on his index finger and thumb before flipping it like a coin. It made an orb as it spun. In spite of the water the spinning coin arched perfectly to Moire and she didn't even have to catch it, merely hold out a hand for it to fall into.

"A gift, for the Queen of Rebma, the reflection of Amber," said Bleys. "Yours."

Moire looked at it closely. The ring was small, plain, and did not seem to have any markings or writing. She pinched it between two fingers.

"And what exactly is the meaning of this?" she asked.

"It's a gift!" he replied.

"So there's no meaning to it. You walked to Rebma to give me a ring and don't mean anything by it. We've never met. And it's a gift." None of her statements were questions but each one sounded like a demand.

"No, Moire of Rebma. I only want a little of your time," he replied. "A meeting. In private."

Moire stared at him. Bleys smirked. He wore an identical ring on his own finger. Several others were big things, ornate and jeweled, but he wore a plain one on the ring finger of his left hand.

"I'll think about it," Moire replied. She put the ring down but didn't put it on.

"I appreciate that." Bleys winked. "Now on an entirely unrelated note, is Llewella here? I have a matter of family business to put before her."

Moire scowled. She nodded once and spoke to a guard, a blue-haired fellow with big muscles and a trident. She told the guard to escort Bleys to a waiting room, to tell Llewella her brother was looking for her, and to prepare herself for a visitor. The guard nodded and left. Bleys followed, and the throne-room was briefly silent.

Several men and women around the courtroom waited to resume business, but Moire watched Bleys leave. Her face looked torn. She distrusted and yet did not look away until he was gone, and once he was, she inspected the plain gold ring like it had answers. Her courtiers waited. She clenched the ring in her fist as they returned to business.

#

Llewella put on a bit more clothing than the locals and met Bleys in drawing room. Two open windows allowed fish to swim in and out, and one of Rebma's fuelless fires inhabited the hearth. Two felt-wrapped whicker chairs with high backs and wide arms faced the windows with the fire behind them, and Llewella waited in one.

She wore white silk to set off her hair, for like Moire, her sister, Llewella's hair and eyes were green. The princess's eyes were a lighter color than the deep jade of Moire, closer to sky blue though flecked with gold. Over her trunks she wore double long white draperies that hung to golden sandals and climbed her back to a gold torc. They curled in undulating piles between her thighs. In front the silk dress was cut in an ancient style. Two white panels of silk met a gold band around her torso.

She was thinking of how different Amber's dress was from Rebma's and second guessing her wardrobe, modest here, when Bleys strolled in. He tumbled into the open whicker seat without upsetting it and greeted the sister he hadn't seen in years.

"Llewella, you look damp."

"That happens under water. I hear you had a personal matter for me?"

"Several. First, Random is putting on his king hat, and he's giving out rings. He has a handful. This one's for you," said Bleys and casually handed her a ring. "He gave me another one, but I, shall we say, have some reservations about accepting Random's sovereign gifts."

"If you understated that any more, you'd be mumbling." Llewella took the ring and slipped it on with a measure of disdain. Bleys had been paying more attention to being indignant than her, so she admired it to make sure he knew. It was nicely understated and fit well.

"I always enunciate. It's why I'm so popular."

"What did you do with yours?"

"Gave it to Moire. Don't tell her it's from Random."

Llewella lowered her hand and regarded him over her fingertips. "Oh?"

"Amber and Rebma are reflections. Both have Rebman queens. I'm being neighborly."

Llewella folded her hands in her lap, and somehow, the very slightest hint of a smirk appeared around her face. Llewella had not smirked in quite some time.

"Both Rebman queens, but only Amber has an Amberite king," she observed.

"Ah, don't get crazy. I'm just being neighborly. Don't tell her the ring is from Random."

"My lips are sealed," she said, but now her lips were definitely smirking too. "What else? You said several."

"Just one. I'm waiting for someone from Amber, but I have something to do in Arden. I'd like you to welcome this agent of mine when he gets here, and keep an eye on him. He's injured. Try not to let him die."

"That would be a significant imposition," said Llewella. "What's in it for me?"

"I just gave you a ring!"

"You said Random gave me this ring."

"I carried it! Sister Llewella, greatest and most noble of my sisters, which is a statement I mean somewhat as Fiona's being a shit, give me this boon, I beseech you."

"Please do not mix slang and formality. I understand you think you're being funny. You are not." She stopped smirking and scowled.

"Ach, tough crowd. Fine. Will you do it? I just need you to keep an eye on him."

She hemmed and hawed. "Oh, I don't know, fine, I guess. What's his name? And there is only one, correct?"

"Yes. His name's Obrecht. He's harmless." Bleys grinned at her.

#

A few years ago the forces of Chaos had pushed into Garnath along the Black Road. The so-called Siege of Amber described about five years wherein an osmosis of evil beings beset the city on Kolvir, always defeated, and yet never repelled. No enemy commander could be killed for no one commanded. No lord ruled the invasion to be a target for assassination. The Siege of Amber allowed a drift of malice from all of shadow to the city.

In the pubs and bars Amberites wondered what brought the besiegers. They wondered who had opened the way and what had closed it later. They wondered why the rest of the shadow felt such envy at the one true city they manifested a gestalt hatred that often meant their deaths.

Obrecht sat in the bars and listened as he drank. He didn't have an answer; he'd just come with the rest.

In a shadow called Ballire not without similarity to eighteenth century France, Obrecht had killed two men and stolen their money. It was his first killing, unexpected and unintentional, and only his third robbery. It was never supposed to go like that. Obrecht had starved and eaten grass from his yard until it made him sick. He'd stolen grass from his neighbor until the old rich woman invoked the police because he was stealing food from her cows. The court jailed him, billed him for jail, and took his hovel to pay his bills. And Obrecht had undertaken crime.

The first robbing was a businesslike affair that went professionally well without preparation. On impulse he drew a knife on an old man in the dark streets of Ballire, and the other exchanged his wallet for his life. They'd gone their separate ways. Obrecht lived for two months on that one mugging, staying to the central districts where the city could pay for gas in the lamp posts. He ate like he had, only better. His sickness vanished, his bowels stilled, his teeth no longer wiggled in his head.

But he ran out of money and sank into the dark streets of outer Ballire to surface again, ate well again, and live again under the whitish gold flame of gas light in dirty lamps. Another two months passed. The third time something went wrong.

The mark walked alone, but Obrecht didn't know his friend walked behind him, briefly delayed. Obrecht never learned why. Still lean but not starving, Obrecht jumped out of a darker alley to the dark street and presented arms, demanding money or a life, and the mark started screaming.

Obrecht tried to shush him. The mark wouldn't be shushed. They struggled.

Another voice took up the shout from behind.

"Antietam!"

"It's the Night Killer!" yelled Antietam the mark, and at once jumped on Obrecht, catching his knife arm.

Obrecht struggled and tried to run, but the mark held him like a vise. His friend was almost coming, and the friend drew a long, heavy sword that reflected starlight as if it flickered. Obrecht tried to run, slipped and fell, and the Antietam climbed on top of him, letting go of Obrecht's arms to rain punches on his fist.

Obrecht struck, and the knife passed up below the ribs, unlimbering the lungs. Antietam gasped, and his mouth fell open.

"Murder!" screamed Waltmath, the name the police would give the second victim later. "The Night Killer has murdered Antietam!"

Obrecht rolled out from under the dying man and ran, and Waltmath leaped over the body to chase into the alley.

In the alley blades flew, in darkness where both were blind as luck. Obrecht lived, Waltmath died, and the thief ran away starving. He never got the money.

Witnesses who hadn't helped described the killer to the police. The State put a thousand crowns on the Night Killer's head for the murder of Antietam and Waltmath, and connection to nine other killings of the same sort.

A pathway opened up in the unlit quarters of Ballire. It was a black road that some cops never found and others walked easily. It carried Obrecht away from the posters with his face and took him to Amber. In a battle in Garnath, Julian led the gleaming forces of Amber against the dirty horde, and Obrecht just left.

He got a job and an apartment. He found a girl who would keep watch so no second mark arrived. He cased his targets carefully and picked the rich ones, because Tatianna was not cheap. His cousin arrived and worked metals, and a ring is a necklace is a coin after it's melted into a bar. A little extra money stretched dockworker wages a long way, and eventually he marked one Captain Armist, took her money and her rings, and ran into a bit of difficulty thereafter.

But now he wore a ring again.

The dragon Spait turned his great tail on the thing Obrecht to attack the row houses on either side of Dracken's. The people tried to flee, but their yards abutted a steep hill. Tall privacy walls kept them apart. Dragon teeth ripped walls as easily as flesh. Obrecht wore a ring, and he left a dark city again. It was time to be gone.

There was no particular direction to his footsteps, but he walked easily. The illness that had beset him in Navy Central Receiving vanished. His bones knit. He could run or walk, and as rain fell like the wrath of God, he even danced. Half a mile downhill Spait was nothing but a memory, and a mile further and the row houses stopped. Obrecht just happened to be on the southern side of town, and the way out just happened to go along the beach, and Obrecht walked with no particular destination in mind until he just happened to find a cairn in the sand, miles from the city, and wondered how much wetter he could be underwater than in this rain.

He turned smartly to his left and walked confidently into the ocean until it closed over his head.

#

As Rebma mirrored Amber, a monster attacked the city.

The city of Rebma stood like a glowing city on a hill over the depths of the Sea of Amber. The stairway from the beach lead down much as the stairway from Tir-na Nog'th lead down to the castle itself, and like Amber

on Kolvir, Rebma sat on Rivlok, a great seamount. The stairway of Rebma made its own moonlight in the form of flames on spires, and these duplicated into countless multitudes within the city. It gleamed within the dark. The city Rebma seemed not to reflect the harbor and harbor cities below the mountain.

It may have. There were no lights down there, and the people of Rebma did not venture into the deeps. The toes of Rivlok hung into the depths called Trey Kray's Chasm, named for Moire and Llewella's mother's father, who had ventured down and not returned.

The people of Rebma noted that Rebma seemed like two cities: a city on a hill spreading light to the darkness, and an anglerfish's lure sitting just above the Chasm. They wondered if anglerfish ever got scared of what might rise to take their bait.

From the depths came the serpent Rog. At the instant Spait slew Benedict the serpent darted upward, giving no warning and making no sounds. It swam like a serpent, all head and body. If there was another city down Rivlok's side, perhaps Rog came from the point mirroring Benedict's death. Perhaps it came from somewhere deeper and darker.

Rog smashed into the rear gates of the city, those that warded a narrow path down the upper slopes of Rivlok where the mermen harvested shellfish. This gate faced the roads in Amber. Rog could have gone over easily, but it tore through iron bars rendered impenetrable to seawater by the nature of the place and scattered them. The first to die was a woman running for her life as an impromptu spear tumbled from the shattered gate to smash in her skull. Screams, cries, and the ringing of swords on shields met Rog. The serpent laughed. It swam through the gatehouse and over the city, and darted down to seize a green-haired man in giant teeth. The man could not cry out before Rog crushed him. Blood spread through the water over Rebma and leaked from the serpent's gills as it swam on.

Runners took off for the throne room and the queen. She was talking with her sister, and they had about ninety seconds before they heard. They would have less than two minutes before they understood.

Llewella and Moire had been talking about Llewella's choice of clothing. Moire had asked about the tunic that her half-sister put on after meeting Bleys, as by tradition and comfort underwater everyone in Rebma went topless. Up until earlier that day Llewella had as well. Then her brother had visited. She'd gone from a trunks to a light dress, and now wore a tunic and pants.

"He's sending an agent of his to see me," explained Llewella before the serpent Rog was yet visible from the walls of Rebma. "And meeting visitors of Amber makes me self-conscious. I don't like meeting them, but Bleys has a way about him of imposing for favors. Now I have to meet this Obrecht."

"But why did you change?" asked Moire.

Llewella didn't immediately answer.

"You are so odd," said Moire. "You've lived here how many years and taken refuge so many times. Yet in times of stress, even receiving visitors, you revert to upwater custom."

"No, no," replied Llewella. "Well, perhaps, but not this time. It's Bleys. He's up to something."

"Why do you say that?"

"He's awake and breathing."

"He seemed fine to me."

Llewella looked over at her sister. "Oh, did he? Did he give you that?"

Moire looked down at the ring in her fist. "This?"

Llewella nodded. Green hair waved.

"Does it mean something in Amber?" asked Moire.

"Not necessarily. It can, but it doesn't always."

"Amber doesn't have customs about rings?" asked Moire.

"If you're speaking of wedding rings, I remind you custom in Amber descends from Oberon, and he was open about the meaning of marriage. Wedding rings aren't quite as established upwater as rumor makes them," replied Llewella. She hid a smirk but not well.

"So it doesn't?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say it absolutely doesn't."

Moire made a face at her and slipped the ring on. Llewella laughed.

They heard the first scream and stopped laughing.

The courtiers asked among themselves what was that, as if their neighbors had heard something they hadn't. Walls, doors, and people made shouts a confused mishmash. Moire called for a runner, but the hall runner was doing her paperwork. The office of the Rebman Exchequer wanted runners to annotate their time in a new way. When she came to the throne, another runner arrived from downwater, and he was stained with blood. It plumed off him and soiled the water, seeming to come forever without being diluted.

"Serpent, your Majesty." He spoke around gasps. "A serpent comes from downwater, and it attacks us."

For an instant, none of the courtiers spoke.

Moire said, "Call army. Summon the forces. Get my generals and kill it," and shouting filled the room. At the center of pandemonium, Moire asked Llewella, "What can you do? Princess of Amber, Daughter of Oberon, we are attacked by a serpent."

"Call the boys," she replied and drew her trumps. "Benedict's a hero."

Try as she might, she could not reach him. Maybe the room was too noisy, her fear was too distracting.

"Gerard perhaps," she said.

He was far in shadow, and contact did not come swiftly. They spoke as if through a fog, and not one word in ten made it through. Soon she lost contact, and attempted to try again when breaking stone echoed through the throneroom.

Llewella's concentration failed her, and she crouched low. Moire sat frozen on her throne. Both looked up.

The stone ceiling rose in vaults. Arches linked the pillars and demarcated spaces wherein great paintings of Amber decorated stone. They showed Oberon triumphant, Amber majestic, and Kolvir tall, and the people of

Rebma had not replaced them. But in their own way the ceiling of Moire's throne room took on the aspect of its place. The white spaces were filled in, and blue skies redone in navy and green to become seas. Trees in the forest of Arden were accented to become depths of Sargasso, and panels showing storms that raged behind the unicorn rampant above people were split with a sea surface, that it was people under the sea, green people with hair of brown, blue, and navy, looking up at the unicorn. Moire never spited Amber, and yet the ceiling of her throne room was her own.

Above the stone something fell. A great crash echoed above, leaking through the pillars until the vast chamber tolled like a bell ringing doom. Rog had come to Rebma, and her queen understood.

"The roof is broken," whispered Moire. "It is among the forest. It is descending. It's in here, with us."

The spaces between roof and ceiling echoed again. A huge panel of stone showing Oberon's head cracked and fell. Crashing, it threw waves that hurled courtiers against the walls. Rog's eye glowed like the fires of the devil and looked down. Now Oberon's body had the serpent's burning eye, and for an instant Llewella saw her father with the monster's power. It vanished and its teeth savaged the ceiling. The stone began to crack and fall. The serpent was breaking through.

"I have no time," whispered Llewella. "I need time." The eye of the serpent fell on her again, and the trumps tumbled from her hand. The beast's eyes filled her mind with visions of ruin and death.

Moire twisted the ring on her finger. "Amber will come. What happens here is mirrored in Amber, and they must certainly know. They must see this and will come. They must come."

And she twisted the ring Bleys had given her, praying for Amber.

#

Tatianna watched Julian dress while pretending to sleep. She had been asleep, but his gentle movements from under her had awoken her. He seemed content to believe she still slept, and she was content to watch him dress.

The building rain echoed against the lower walls of the castle, but the high window overlooked the storm. Evening twilight sat on a rainstorm. To the east the sky turned black. Low stars had already appeared, but at the top of the window some traces of deepest blue remained. There was little to see outside. Tatianna had eyes for none of it but Julian.

He was stronger than Obrecht. His bones were bigger, his arms cut more powerfully. Years of riding Morgenstern had given him legs of a god.

Julian liked to be ridden. She had been surprised. The first time he had held her down, on hand on her breast teasing her nipples with his callouses, one hand on the throat. He'd taken her so hard she'd been as frightened as aroused, pushed to the limits of being hurt as the master horseman rode her. But the second and third times had been slow. After grazing her body, he'd rolled over to put her on top. He'd guided her with hands on her hips.

Tatianna didn't prefer being on top. She had large breasts and preferred the way they looked in clothing, the thinner the better, but thick enough to give structure and keep her from flopping around. Julian had disagreed. When she sat on his stomach, he'd simply scooped her up with one hand on her buttock, lifting her as if she was nothing, adjusted himself, and eased her down. He was amazingly hard and thick.

Panting, Tatianna had leaned forward with the first thrust, and he caught her with a hand to the sternum, straightened her up, and put his hands back on her hips. His fingers pressed furrows in her skin, and she would have bruises later. But if he wanted her straight, Tatianna arched her back with her hands on her hair, thinking her chest flopping around like that couldn't be sexy.

He had clearly disagreed and disagreed again thereafter to be sure.

Now he got dressed, and his little butt stepped into pants with light flexing. She should have bitten him.

Tatianna lay still in a bubble of contentment, warm all over, and filled with a sense of deep satisfaction. She was certain he felt the same. But she needed something more, and in spite of her pleasure, sought about in her mind for a way to catch this one so he couldn't get away.

Julian snuck out the door, but his footsteps didn't go away. After a moment Tatianna crawled out of the warm bed and listened.

"What is it you wanted?" asked Julian, barely audible over the rain. It was louder on the landing.

This tower was a stack of rooms circumnavigated by a stairway, and the stairs brought the sound of rain from below. It must be really hitting the lower parts of the castle. Tatianna's room was mostly circular, with about a third of the outside notched by the rising stairway. That notch met another where the necessary was divided from the main room. They had running water in there, which she understood but had never had. The last third of the wall was her great bay window, and by listening at the door it was out the bay window, down at the rising rainstorm and up at the clear evening stars to the east her head turned.

"I'm in the castle. What do you want?" asked Julian.

Tatianna listened. She didn't hear a reply. She heard nothing, then a bit of buckling.

"I see. Bring me through."

Silence returned and did not leave.

When her curiosity overrode her desire for stealth, she squeezed her chest and cracked open the door. No one was there. She glanced down the old wood stairs. There was no way a man would have walked down there silently. She slipped back inside the room before someone caught her standing naked on the stairway, but not before noticing that her door could be locked from within or without. But she hadn't been locked in yet.

Freely and of her own will, Tatianna shut the door behind her. She wanted to think hard, but she was naked and stank of sex. Inspiration hit, and she realized that the royals might have running water for bathing. In the necessary room her idea of wealth exploded, for not only did the royals have piped water for bathing, they had hot water, unlimited, without need for buckets, cauldrons, or fires. She sank into the first effortless warm bath of her life with the lesser soaps, casual shampoos, toiletries the Amberites had left in here suitable for a holding room just barely above a prison. Fiona, whom Tatianna began to think of as her jailer, had provided conditioner, comb, and brush because the princess wasn't a savage. Tatianna's understanding of comfort changed forever.

In warm water up to her neck Tatianna decided she was going to catch a Prince of Amber.

#

Julian stepped into the emergency room on Random's trump. Caine lay on a gurney with a leather thong between clenched teeth, mostly still. He twitched occasionally. A glass wall separated him from them. Fiona sat in a corner, swirling red wine in a glass and watching it crawl down the sides. Flora sat with her in resplendent black and gold. Both of them wore long dresses, but Flora's hung to the floor in condition for a formal party. Random hadn't changed his clothes.

"Are you sure it's Caine?" asked the huntsman of Arden.

"No," said Random. "Got a plan to find out?"

"Take him to the basement and make him bleed on the Pattern."

"Last time we did that, Dad died fixing it. Are you volunteering to make the walk this time?" asked Random.

Julian didn't reply. He regarded the black-haired patient coldly. "Any marks or wounds?"

"None. I checked him. You and Fiona were the last to see him awake. Fiona ran down to speak us in the Pattern Hall. She says she ran the whole way. Did you see her leave?"

"Running," said Julian. "She could have ran down the stairs, trumped, and finished running."

"Absolutely," agreed Random. "And where were you?"

"In the tower with the girl from the dragon attack," said Julian.

"And what were you doing up there?"

"Her."

Flora blinked and looked over. Random did not seem surprised.

Julian allowed himself awareness of Fiona. In the city they toasted Florimel as the great beauty, and Julian appreciated the truth of it in clinical fashion. Red-haired Fiona, red as her brothers Bleys and Brand, didn't smile as readily and her face never lost composure. Where Flora unleashed her million-dollar smile, Fiona allowed people to amuse her. Her skin was fair, Tatianna's dark like her hair. Julian didn't look at Clarissa's daughter, his half-sister, but his awareness told him she did not express a response when he said he'd slept with the prisoner.

Random continued, saying, "That gives you an interesting alibi: the girl who appeared with the dragon, wearing one of the rings out of shadow. If you say so, I'm sure you did sleep with her, but there's a wide open window of time."

"Who is she?" asked Flora.

Julian answered. "Her name is Tatianna. She's from a shadow called Tentheth. It's my shadow. I found her out there some years ago, and she learned a form of shadow magic involving conjuring. She herself was conjured by art from Shadow. A few years later she came looking for me in Arden, and I turned her away. I hadn't spoken to her inbetween or since. Caine, Fiona, and I escorted her to a holding area. They left, I remained to keep an eye on her, and the rest—happened." Julian stared at Random like he wanted his little brother, the King, to blink first, and held his gaze the whole time.

Random didn't blink. He did twist a jewel around his neck and Julian recognized it. He also suddenly noticed Random wore his crown. He didn't say anything and decided he'd known they were there all along.

Random spun the Jewel of Judgement between his fingers, an immense, irreplaceable ruby, or at least a stone that looked like one. The crown was a plaything of emeralds on seven points, gold and diamonds mashed together because he had to wear a symbol at formal affairs. The people expected it. The Jewel hung from a steel chain around his neck, and the weight of it hurt him. He wished Vialle was here.

"Where's Benedict?" asked Julian.

Random waved vaguely towards the city. "He went down to get things ready. Gerard walked the Pattern to cure his arm, and it may have worked. If it did, Benedict will walk soon. In the meantime he's gathering resources and a crew experienced with that shadow you visited, Middle Earth, for your return."

"Return?" repeated Julian.

Random nodded. "You have work to do."

Julian thought of the crown and the Jewel, and chose not to argue.

Instead he said, "Kingship has bestowed Dad's temperament on you."

Random grunted.

"How does Vialle feel about that?" Julian continued.

And Random caught that too.